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ABSTRACT

The author has identified a set of creative positives that occur frequently among disadvantaged children and upon which can be built successful educational programs. Many of these characteristics have commonly been regarded as educational deficits, but he contends that these qualities are positive strengths which can be capitalized on to facilitate school learning and adult achievement. (DM)

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COMPENSATORY EDUCATION VERSUS EDUCATION BASED UPON

CREATIVE POSITIVES

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Compensatory education in the United States has received enormous support and emphasis during the past decade, especially in the education of children who live in poverty and children from minority ethnic groups. To date, the record of success in these heavily supported ventures has been distressingly dismal. The design and procedures used in compensatory education have generally been counter to one of the most universally accepted ideas in educational psychology, namely that effective education must build upon the skills, concepts, motivations, etc. that the learner already has.

The central thesis of my work for the past seven years has been that any adequate program for the education of disadvantaged children and youth must be built upon their creative positives. As early as 1962, Frank Riessman made a plea that the education of culturally deprived children be built upon their own special strengths. He coined the term "slow gifted" to refer to highly gifted youngsters who appear to be slow learners because they are cautious and careful, are physical learners, and have one-tracked ways of learning. He tried to make us aware of their hidden verbal abilities which come alive in out-of-school situations, in discussions with peers, and in role playing. Only here and there has Riessman's challenge been heeded. To me, the success of these exceptions cries out eloquently above the mass of confusion and failure that hangs heavy above most efforts at compensatory education.

Psychometric Indicators of Creative Positives

Educators have been skeptical of Riessman's claims concerning the strengths of disadvantaged children. His presentation of evidence has not been convincing to them. It is well known that traditional measures of intellectual potentiality and talent identify pitifully few disadvantaged children and young people as gifted. I realize that I face the same skepticism when I talk about the creative positives of disadvantaged children. Perhaps two dozen studies (Torrance, 1971a) by now have accumulated evidence that indicates that lower socioeconomic status children generally perform as well on the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking (1966) as middle-class and upper-class children and that black children generally perform as well as white children. Critics, however, have many ways of "putting down" these results. Perhaps the most frequent and devastating of these is their contention that "the Torrance

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tests are not valid." This simple "put down" has been effective in spite of almost three hundred studies that spell out the content, construct, concurrent, and predictive validity of the tests. The results of several long-range predictive validity studies (Torrance, 1971b, 1972) are now available and indicate rather clearly that test performances during the high school years are predictive of adult creative achievements. In one study involving 252 subjects tested during the high school years and followed up 12 years later, validity coefficients ranged from .43 for the total sample of women and .69 for ninth graders.

There are several very important reasons why disadvantaged children perform comparatively so much better on tests of creative thinking than on tests of intelligence. Some of these reasons spring from the nature of the two types of tests while others grow out of differences in the way of life and cultural values of advantaged and disadvantaged children. Most commonly used intelligence tests require that the child respond in terms of the experiences common in our dominant, advantaged culture but not common in disadvantaged, minority cultures. Thus, the disadvantaged child is not permitted to respond in terms of his own experiences, the experiences common in his culture or unique to himself. Most tests of creative thinking -- and the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking in particular -- permit them to respond in terms of their own experiences. This increases the chances of obtaining responses and makes it possible to evaluate the responses in terms of the child's experiences whatever they might be. The way of life in disadvantaged groups facilitates certain kinds of creative development. For example, it is necessary both in their play and in their home life to improvise with commonplace materials. Thus, it is little wonder that disadvantaged children score higher on the tests of unusual uses of tin cans, cardboard boxes, and junk autos. In fact, critics point out that such performances tell us nothing about the creative thinking of disadvantaged children. They play games with tin cans, make toys from them, use them to patch the roof or stop up a hole in the floor, see big sister store her silk hose in them to protect them from rats, etc. I contend, however, that the habits of thinking developed in this way of life generalizes beyond tin cans, cardboard boxes, and junk autos.

There are a number of other psychometric documentations of the superior creativity of disadvantaged children. Robert Ellison and Calvin Taylor (1970) find no racial bias in the creativity scale of the Alpha Biographical Inventory, suggesting again that the experiences of disadvantaged children and young people facilitate creative development as well as or better than those of the more advantaged. This is in line with the contention of the black psychologist White (1970) that blacks have a greater tolerance than whites for conflict, stress, ambiguity, and ambivalence. It is also in line with his contention that in the black disadvantaged culture the hero by and large is the brother who messes with the system and gets away with it.

Relevant psychometric documentation has also been offered by Susan Houston (1970). Houston maintains that creative fantasy, not lack of intelligence, accounts for the poor test scores among low socio-economic status black children. Using a variant on the old party game

"telephone," she told a story to a child and asked him to repeat it to a second child, who told it back to her. With a sample of 200 first graders, she found that the low socioeconomic status blacks did poorly when tests were scored for accurate parroting, ranked high when scored for elaboration. When white children got stuck repeating the story, coparticipants would let them suffer it out. But black children almost inevitably came to the aid of their partners. High socioeconomic status blacks performed like their white peers. Houston reported that blacks are motivated to create a fantasy with as much individual style, creativity and flair as possible to show their individual competence, while white children demonstrated competence by following instructions to the letter. His conclusion was that what examiners do not see in the performance of disadvantaged blacks is that they are doing a whole other task rather than the one posed by the examiner.

List of Creative Positives

When I speak of the creative positives of disadvantaged children I do not limit myself to those strengths that have to be detected by psychometric means. For the most part, I am talking about abilities that can be observed with a high degree of frequency among disadvantaged children by anyone who is willing to become a sensitive, open-minded human being in situations where trust and freedom are established. On the basis of my own work with disadvantaged children -- mostly blacks but including whites -- I believe that I have identified a set of creative positives that occur with a high degree of frequency among disadvantaged children generally and upon which we can build successful educational programs. The following is a tentative listing of these positives:

1. Ability to express feelings and emotions
2. Ability to improvise with commonplace materials
3. Articulateness in role playing and storytelling
4. Enjoyment of and ability in visual art -- drawing, painting, sculpture, etc.
5. Enjoyment of the ability in creative movement, dance, dramatics
6. Enjoyment of and ability in music, rhythm
7. Expressive speech
8. Fluency and flexibility in non-verbal media
9. Enjoyment of and skills in group activities, group problem-solving
10. Responsiveness to the concrete
11. Responsiveness to the kinesthetic
12. Expressiveness of gestures, "body language," etc.
13. Humor
14. Richness in imagery in informal language
15. Originality of ideas in problem-solving
16. Problem-centeredness
17. Emotional responsiveness
18. Quickness of warm-up.

Many of these characteristics have commonly been regarded as deficits, especially insofar as education is concerned. My contention is that these qualities can be regarded as positives or strengths which can be capitalized upon to facilitate school learning and adult achievement. I am preparing a book-length manuscript showing how both of these things can be accomplished. Though the limitations of this symposium will not permit detailed illustrations, I would like to cite a few experiments in which deliberate efforts have been made to build educational experiences upon some one of these creative positives with success and describe one example of how creative positives can be used in a specific case.

Programs Using Creative Positives

The creative positive of enjoyment of and ability in music and rhythm was used by Doris Clary (1970), a black teacher in Newport News, Virginia, who received the Instructor magazine's top national award for new ideas in teaching. During her first six years of teaching, Doris Clary tried to apply the methods she had been taught. She realized that in too many instances she failed to reach children. The following excerpt from her account tells a part of this interesting story:

I realized I must make use of their natural learning styles and the skills they already had. In their world, physical expression, dancing, and singing are a part of living....Finally, I considered the kind of person I am, for the only truly effective classroom practices are those a teacher has adapted to suit his own personality, tastes, and individual teaching style....Were music and dance the answer? For the next three years, I watched my classes gain a sense of hope and a taste of success. ...Not to entertain and indulge whims but to teach subject matter.

A number of other people have shown how music and dance may be the key to unlocking and building other interests and intellectual skills, among them Ianni (1967), Goldsmith (1968), Bushnell (1970), Witt (1971).

Hy Ruchlis (1968) has demonstrated how the creative positive of enjoyment of and skill in games can be used to motivate learning. Drake (1969) has described how the creative positive of ability to express feelings and emotions can be used to stimulate pupil interest and excitement in learning. ~~Amram and Giese (1968) have shown how the positives of problem-centeredness and enjoyment of and skills in group problem-solving can be used as a tool for motivating disadvantaged adolescents.~~ The HEP-UP program involving black students as co-investigators in medical laboratories at the University of Pennsylvania (Shepherd, 1972) illustrates how the creative positives of responsiveness to the concrete and skills in small group problem-solving can be used to motivate interest and achievement in the medical sciences.

An Illustrative Case

To help us become more concrete right now, let me close with an illustrative case given me by a former student, describing how she used the creative positives to motivate a disadvantaged boy in her sixth grade class. I'll describe it in her own words.

The principal, the janitor, the teachers all worked on the problem of John, the vandal. He was reported as being the culprit of many of weekend shambles at our school, but no one could prove anything. He couldn't stay still very long; his iron muscles seemed to need to move every minute; he was as strong, at 12 years, as most grown men. He was almost a permanent fixture in the office because of undesirable behavior. He was skilled, a natural, in things mechanical. He liked to boss and was often swaggering and bully-like in his playground behavior. The consensus, as a result of brainstorming, was that John did not feel he belonged. The problem was how to make him feel he did belong.

He was appointed by the Student Council (in which he could never be an officer, because of their strict code of grades and behavior) to be chairman of the Lunchroom Committee. He organized a team of boys; they spent half their noon recess cleaning, moving tables, helping the janitor. He began to notice the litter which collected in certain windy corners of the schoolyard. His "gang" cleaned it up. He helped park cars for Back-to-School-Night. One woman ran her car into a deep ditch, when she did not wait for John to show her the way. The way he directed her, telling her how to cramp the wheels and when was a marvel. She would have had to have a tow-away, except for his know-how. He had organized the entire parking area without a hitch, where the drivers followed his directions, and all this done as well as an adult could have done it.

Happily, as John became "part" of the school, the vandalism became less and less. Reports came to us that he threatened (and coming from this boy that was no mean threat) others who tried to destroy school property. Happily, he began to take an interest in school work. His father told us that John had at last said, "I like school." He said John had learned to read things around the house, in the neighborhood, at the store, and on trips for the first time in his life. His art work (racing cars, engines and antique cars) was excellent. We all hope some of this progress will continue when he leaves us this fall to go to junior high school.

This teacher recognized at least three of my creative positives in John and made use of them to motivate him to learn and to change his

behavior -- enjoyment of and skill in visual art, enjoyment of and skill in group activities and problem-solving, and responsiveness to the concrete. For a teacher to do something like this, it is necessary for her to be more concerned about developing potentialities than about punishing misbehavior or in compensating for deficiencies. My contention is that if a teacher succeeds in helping a youngster develop potentialities, the misbehavior and the deficiencies will disappear or be reduced.

Sometimes a poet can say in a few words more than an educational researcher can say with tons of data and miles of literature review. I believe Gwendolyn Brooks' poem to a "Boy Breaking Glass" provides a most eloquent commentary on the case of John, the Vandal, and this whole business of building learning programs on the creative positives of disadvantaged children. She calls the boy's broken window "a cry of art" and speaks for him the words he cannot:

I shall create!
If not a note, a hole.
If not an overture, a desecration.

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